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ABSTRACT

Three arguments are proposed in favor of writing without an audience. The first states that even though ignoring the audience may lead to worse writing at first, it will often lead to better writing in the end. The intimidating nature of the teacher or an unknown as audience supports this. The second argument states that writing without an audience can sometimes lead to better writing immediately. The qualities of effective writing include a lack of self consciousness and total involvement with the topic. The Piagetian and Vygotskian developmental models ("language begins as private" versus "language begins as social") give two different lenses through which to look at a typical weakness in student writing--the tendency to leave so much unexplained and undeveloped--and determine whether this weakness is a failure to connect with the audience or a failure to connect with the self and the issue. The third argument calls into question the assumption that writing that is "audience aware" is more mature than writing that is not. Many professional poets, writers, and philosophers insist that their most serious work is not communication to an audience at all, but rather a commitment to language, reality, logic, and experience. These arguments imply that teachers must (1) help students not only to fit their words to an audience, but also to write in solitude, without dependence on social interchange; and (2) become a special kind of audience for students, one that trusts and supports them without being judgmental. (HTH)

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CLOSING MY EYES AS I TALK:

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST AUDIENCE AWARENESS

Peter Elbow

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CLOSING MY EYES AS I TALK:
AN ARGUMENT AGAINST AUDIENCE AWARENESS

Peter Elbow, 6/85

In making an argument for writing without audience awareness, I am presenting only half of a dialectical position. If my audience were infinitely patient, I would also argue in favor of writing with audience awareness, making points such as these:

--That most writing (though not all) is meant as communication to an audience.

--That for most writing, therefore, the writer must devote at least some of her time to putting audience in mind in an effort to ensure that what she writes fits that audience.

--That we should teach audience awareness because young people are usually less skilled than older ones at "decentering" or taking into account the needs of different points of view; and because the medium of writing tends to make us neglect audience (given that we usually write without our audience before us).

--And finally (this being the argument from Vygotsky and Bakhtin which Fish and Bruffee, with their different emphases, are doing so much to make current) that language and writing are inherently social, and that therefore we tend to dry up the roots of writing if we treat it only as a private phenomenon.

Thus I grant most of the "audience awareness" points, indeed my first published essay was an argument that teachers should assign writing addressed to actual audiences outside the classroom, get it to those readers, and evaluate the papers on the basis of the actual reactions of those real readers. ("A Method for Teaching Writing," CE---) My continuing plea for small feedback groups in teaching has been, among other things, an argument for giving students a greater sense of audience for their writing.

But in what follows I will neglect all this because I sense the audience argument is getting out of hand. I feel someone needs to make the opposite case. Therefore, taking a leaf from the surgeon general, I give a warning: too much audience awareness may be injurious to the health of your writing. I am here to celebrate writing with no audience awareness at all.

I will make three arguments. (1) Even though ignoring our audience may lead to worse writing at first, it will often lead to better writing in the end (better than we could have produced if we kept audience in mind). (2) Sometimes ignoring our audience will lead us to better writing--immediately. (3) We must question the assumption--derived from an oversimple importation from psychology--that writing with audience awareness is "more mature" than writing without it. (Jennifer Clarke's case study of Joe really applies only to my second argument--and obviously we present it as suggestive

illustration, not as any kind of compelling demonstration.)

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This is a simple, practical point that applies to much writing: We will often find it helpful to ignore audience altogether during the early stages of our writing when we must write to an audience which is in any way difficult or dangerous. For example, when students have to write to someone they find intimidating (and of course they often experience teachers as intimidating) their minds often go blank as they start to write. Or they start thinking wholly defensively. That is, as they write down each thought or sentence (or even each word), they think of nothing else but how the reader will criticize or object to it. So they try to qualify what they've just written--or write out some answer to a possible objection. Before long the student is completely tied in knots and cannot simply say clearly what she wants to say--cannot figure out what she really thinks. She begins to doubt herself completely and becomes stalled in her writing. We may not realize how often this happens to our students for we often have no sense of their writing process: we just see texts which either don't have much to say or are jumbled and tied in knots.

Another example. We are writing to a person or group with whom we have an awkward relationship (and of course students often have an awkward relationship with teachers). Whenever we start to write to them, we start beating around the bush and feeling shy or scared; or we start to write in some rather stilted, overly careful prose style. (Think about the cute and overly clever style of many memos we get in our departmental mailboxes: this is often due the awkwarness and selfconsciousness that people feel when writing to colleagues.) Or we are writing to some person or group we have never met before, or perhaps to some audience we find vague such as "the general reader" or the "educated public." We often have nothing to say to "the general reader" or to "the educated public"--except cliches that we know we don't even quite believe.

In all these cases I have found that it is enormously helpful during the early stages of writing to ignore entirely the audience one is writing to: either write to no one in particular or to oneself (just suiting oneself); or write to the wrong audience, that is, to an inviting audience of friends or allies. By ignoring audience or by thinking of a more inviting one, often the clenched and defensive discourse starts to run clear.

When talking to a person or group I sometimes find myself involuntarily closing my eyes when I come upon some issue that is difficult for me. I see now that this is a natural and instinctive attempt to blot out awareness of audience when I need all my awareness or attention for the matter at hand. This is a fairly common behavior. Because the audience is imperiously present as we speak, we need to make this positive act to blot them out. But even when we write, alone in a room, sometimes (with some audiences) we must make a positive act to push away awareness of them if we want to get our own

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thoughts straight for ourselves.

Here is a student writing about her audience awareness:

> I haven't got any trust for the unknown audience. You know ------ [author of a text] tells us to pay attention to the audience that will be reading our papers, and I gave that a try. I ended up without putting a word on paper until I decided the hell with -----; I'm going to write to who I damn well want to; otherwise I can hardly write at all.

After we have managed to write a draft (or copious draft material) and to make the points we want to make -perhaps finding a voice we want--then we can turn our attention to our audience. Then we need to do all the things that audience-awareness advocates preach: think about readers, figure out how to suit words and thoughts to them, and make any adjustments needed in stance, tone, and voice.

Perhaps, for example, for this audience we do need to hide what we think or to disguise our feelings. That's hard to do well when at the same time we are engaged in the process of trying to figure out to our own satisfaction what we think or even how we feel. The effect of a difficult, intimidating, or confusing audience on most of us is to make it hard to get clear in our own mind what we think and what we want to say.*

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*Of course there are certain occasions when it helps to think about audience right from the start. That is, we experience certain audiences as inviting or facilitating. When we think about them as we write, we think of more and better things to say and somehow they arrive naturally shaped and coherently structured. There are even occasions when it helps to keep a threatening audience in mind right from the start of our writing process: if we can sit down and, as it were, look them in the eye and write right to them, this act of standing-up-to-the-threat can sometimes help us to grasp the nettle itself and say just what needs saying. An audience functions as a field of force: the closer we come or the more we think about the people in it, the more force that field tends to exert on the contents of our minds. The practical question, then, is always this: does this particular audience function for us as a helpful or an inhibiting field of force.

In effect, I am making an argument for inviting writer-based prose in the early stages of certain writing projects. My assumption in this first argument is that even though writer-based prose is inferior to reader-based prose, we can sometimes figure out our meaning better if we start with it: we may eventually fit our words better to our audience if we let ourselves start out with words which don't fit them at all.

It was of course Linda Flower who gave currency to the terms "writer-based" and "reader-based" prose. (See her "Writer-Based Prose: a Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," College English

41, September 1979, 19-37.) But I'm struck with how often people skew the emphasis of her essay. They talk as though she had written only a stern harangue about how we must immediately get students to stop producing writer-based prose and start producing reader-based prose. In truth her essay is a much more subtle and charitably-spirited analysis--in effect saying, "Look at all the occasions which lead our students to use writer-based prose. Of course they do it. Writer-based prose is natural; it's where people's linguistic strength often lies; it's developmentally enabling and helps people to move on to learn to produce reader-based prose. It's not the desired end goal, but it is a useful and often necessary interim step." Because people are too quick to see her article as a story about what's wrong with writer-based prose, they miss the substantial degree to which she was writing a celebration of writer-based or non-audience-aware prose.

She uses terms from cognitive science and so talks about students often experiencing a "cognitive overload" when they try to think about audience while they're trying to think about what to say or how to strengthen the logic of their argument. What she doesn't say, however, despite her interest in planning and control as central to the writing process, is that we can teach students to notice when audience awareness is getting in their way, and if so, to put aside temporarily the needs of audience.*

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*Flower frequently raps the knuckles of people who suggest a correct or optimum order for steps in the writing process. Notice, however, that she implies such an order here--at least for this common situation: when attention to audience causes an overload, start out by ignoring them while you attend to your thinking; then turn your attention to audience.

I think we should acknowledge a conflict here between two current pieties in composition theory: (a) We should think of writing as the making of new meaning, not just as the transmitting of meanings already worked out. (b) We should think about audience as we write. "Think about our audience" is not trustworthy advice until after we have worked our meaning out. If we haven't yet worked it out, thinking about audience often impedes us in doing so.

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My first argument says, in effect, that ignoring our audience often leads us to worse writing in the short run but better writing (and less frustration) in the long run. For my second argument, I want to go farther and claim that ignoring our audience can produce better writing--immediately. That is, writer-based prose can be better than reader-based prose.

My point is that a characteristic problem in mediocre writing (not terrible writing) is too much self-consciousness or awareness of audience. In much mediocre writing, we can feel the writer being too much like a salesman trained to look the customer in the eye and put

himself in the customer's shoes--too selfconscious in thinking about how the audience might perceive or react. There is something too stagey or self-aware about the voice. (Writing produced this way reminds us of the ineffective actor who distracts us because we can feel her consciousness of her own moves designed to have specific effects on the audience.) When we read such prose we wish the writer would stop thinking about us and stop trying to "adjust" or "fit" what she is saying to our frame of reference: "Damn it, put your entire attention on what you are saying," we want to say, "and forget about us."

(An enthusiast for audience awareness might object at this point that Joe's poor writing for his teacher didn't suffer at all from audience awareness--merely from a terrible misunderstanding of his audience and its tastes: "What Joe needs is to think more and better about audience--not less." But look again at Joe's problematical writing and see if you don't sense--besides a miscalculation about what teachers like--a kind of pervasive consciousness of audience that acts as a kind of poison. Even in his final revision for the portfolio--after he understands better what his audience wants--some of this poison creeps back into his essay and into his in-class writing for the portfolio. Whereas he continues to attain passages of better writing when he forgets about audience.)

Let me make the point positively instead of negatively: If we examine really good passages in student or professional writing we can often tell that what happened--what made it good--is that the writer finally got so wrapped up in her meaning and her language at these points that she forgot all about audience needs--she finally "broke through." It is characteristic of much truly good writing to be, as it were, on fire with itself: consciousness of readers is burned away; instead all consciousness is wrapped up in the subject. Such writing is analogous to the performance of the actor who has so fully become the person he is playing that he stops thinking--or even caring--about the audience. The writer is not leaking attention away from her thinking or her language into awareness of the audience.

I would argue that, in the end, what we seek in really excellent writing is not prose that is right for us but prose that is right for thinking, for language, for experience or for "things." If in addition, it is clear and well suited for us, we appreciate that--indeed we feel insulted if the writer did not somehow try to make her writing available to us before delivering it. But if it succeeds at being really true to language and thinking we are willing to put up with difficulty as readers.

Here is Paul Goodman on this matter:

> "[M]uch serious writing, perhaps most, is written for no particular audience; and much fiction and poetry for none at all. Nevertheless, the writer is always under an obligation to make it 'clear'. . . But 'clear' does not mean easily comprehensible. Consider Mallarme, an exceedingly clear and logical writer, but who cannot sacrifice the conciseness, texture, and immediacy of his style just to be easily understood

> by readers, so you have to figure it out like a puzzle. My opinion is that, in most cases, the writer is not thinking of a reader at all; he makes it 'clear' as a contract with language." (pp. 163-4, "The Literary Process," in Speaking and Language: Defense of Poetry.)

To turn from Mallarme to our classrooms, I continually see evidence that convinces me that much of the crabbed and tangled writing our students turn in results from their thinking too much about audience. In many passages of freewriting and journal writing, we can follow the writer's train of thought better when she is self-absorbed and we are just overhearing, than when she is trying to work it out carefully with us in mind. And look at the arresting presence and power in those passages of freewriting or journal writing when students have finally glommed onto something important and are pursuing it with utter absorbtion--no doubling-back awareness of us as readers. We seldom see such writing in their careful essays where they think about us.

There is something important to be figured out about voice and its relation to audience awareness. That is, even though we often develop our voice through interaction with audience--through finally speaking up and speaking out to others--and even though much dead student writing comes from their not really treating their writing as a communication with real readers--nevertheless, again the opposite point is also true. That is, we often do not really develop a strong, authentic voice till we find important occasions for ignoring audience and writing only to ourselves or to no one. Ignoring audience may permit an overly selfconacious, mannered, or cute voice finally to run clear.

The voice that students and writers produce when they ignore audience is sometimes odd or idiosyncratic in some way, but stronger. We cannot usually trust a voice unless it is unaware of us and our needs and speaking out in its own terms. John Ashberry said it bluntly:

> Very often people don't listen to you when you speak to them. It's only when you talk to yourself that they prick up their ears. (NY Times interview, 12/16/84, "John Ashberry: The Pleasure of Poetry," David Lehman.)

I sense that the arresting power in a good deal of writing by small children comes from their obliviousness to audience. Children are experts at total absorbtion in what they are saying. As readers, we are somehow sucked into a more-than-usual connection with the meaning itself because of the child's gift for more-than-usual investment in what she is saying. In short we can feel some pieces of children's writing as very "writer-based"--yet it's precisely that quality which makes it arresting and effective for us as readers. After all, why should we settle for the experience of a writer entering our point of view if we can have the much more exciting and enriching experience of being sucked into her point of view? This is just the experience that children are skilled at providing through their undividedness in their own point of view.

In an earlier draft I had a footnote calling attention to an interesting ambiguity I thus uncovered in the term "writer-based prose": should we apply the term to the product (a text that doesn't work on readers) or the process (a text made "egocentrically" with no attention to readers--but which might nevertheless work very well on readers)? But the more I struggle to get things clear, the more I conclude that the terms "writer-based" and "reader-based" break down. They consist of two terms which prescribe an obligatory relationship among four subterms:

Writer-based implies:
(1) A writer wrapped up in her own point of view as she writes and taking no account of audience.
(2) A text that therefore doesn't work for readers.

Reader-based implies:
(3) A writer aware of readers as she writes and taking them into account.
(4) A text that therefore does work for readers.

If we really want to describe the writing process with any fidelity to the differences among writers and writing situations, we need all four terms--and we need to be able to configure them the other way too (i.e., 1 with 3 and 2 with 4). That is, sometimes audience awareness helps the text and sometimes it does not.

I can be accused of taking a "romantic" position here--in effect, peddling the value of warbling one's woodnotes wild. But I assert the austere classic truth too: writers must almost invariably revise with conscious awareness of audience. (Thus even though Joe will be better off and have less revising to do if he learns to start out writing reflectively for himself in his journal rather than writing "an essay" for his teacher; nevertheless he will also have to learn to recognize which passages to keep, which to throw away, and how to make those often small deft changes. It's a hard skill to learn and it involves audience awareness and other sophisticated rhetorical skills. Many students produce strong and interesting freewriting but end up with revisions that are not just dull but often even confusing and poorly structured. I'm not surprised at the NAEP test results which show that roughly half of the high school students tested made their writing worse when they revise it. It certainly happens frequently to me in my revising. There's no escape from the need to revise--however we go about producing our first drafts.)

Having made two practical claims (that ignoring audience can help our writing in the long run and also in the short run), I turn to a final, longer, argument about theory: some of the backing for the current emphasis on audience-awareness derives from a model of psychological development that is wrong or incomplete or badly applied. This model assumes that reader-based prose is "more mature" than writer-based prose--that the activity of keeping your audience in mind as you write is at a higher level of psychological development than the activity of not keeping readers in mind. Flower speaks of writer-based prose as corresponding to the inability to decenter characteristic of early stages in Piagetian development, and reader-based prose as corresponding to later more mature stages of development.

This psychological assumption needs to be questioned. Flower herself is fairly careful, noting that she is taking Piagetian categories that apply to very small children and applying them only suggestively in a rough-and-ready, analogistic or even metaphorical way to much older adolescents and adults. But others are much cruder in their oversimple importation of the Piagetian model.

Let me start by acknowledging that of course there is clearly something right in this view of development. Thus I must do a quick "on the one hand/on the other hand" dance.

On the one hand, children no doubt do get better at decentering as they develop psychologically. As we mature we get better at suiting our discourse to the needs of listeners--particularly to the needs of listeners very different from ourselves. Especially, we get better at doing so consciously--thinking avarely about how things appear to people with viewpoints different from our own. Thus it is obvious that much unskilled writing is unclear or awkward because the writer was doing what it is so easy to do--unthinkingly taking her own frame of reference for granted and not attending to the needs an audience that might have a different frame of reference. And of course this failing tends to be more characteristic of younger, immature, "egocentric" students (and more common in writing since there is no audience present).

But on the other hand, it is crucial to realize that the opposite is also true. The ability to turn off audience awareness--especially when it confuses our thinking or blocks our discourse--is also a "higher" skill and not just a "lower one." I am talking about the ability to use language in what we could call "the desert island mode." It is a skill that usually depends on learning and requires growth and psychological development. Children--and even adults who have not learned the art of quiet thoughtful inner reflection (an art we like to associate with the fruits of higher education)--are often unable to get much cognitive action going in their heads unless there are other people present to have action with. They are dependant on live audience and the social dimension to get their discourse rolling and their thinking off the ground.

For in contrast to the Piagetian model of psychological development implied above (that we start out as private, egocentric little monads and grow up to be public and social), it is important to

invoke a Vygotskian model (deriving also from George Herbert Meade) which says that we start out social and plugged into others; only gradually through growth and development do we learn to "unplug" to any significant degree--to be private and individual. The important general principle here is that we tend to develop our important cognitive capacities by means of social interaction with others, and having done so, we gradually learn to perform them alone. We fold the simple back-and-forth of two people into the complexity ("foldedness") of individual private reflection. We internalize the dialogic dimension. (The word "dialogic" signals a Bakhtinian stream in this train of thought.)

This psychological model of development helps us notice what is just as obvious (once we attend to it) as what the Piagetian model makes us notice: that the ability to produce good thinking and discourse while alone--the possession of a rich and enfolded mental life--is something that people only gradually learn. (Pascal was making a larger existential point than this purely cognitive one, but his words still bear on the issue: "All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber." Pensee 139.) And of course there is a rich correlation between this desert island mentality and writing as a medium: writing is probably the ideal way to develop the ability to think things out in solitude; and also, as we develop this ability, writing is probably the ideal medium for giving it expression.

Let me illustrate this use of language by recording here, unchanged, a piece of writing I did for myself as I was engaged in revising an earlier draft of this piece.

> Even as I'm trying to think this matter through something happens to me that illustrates my point.
>
> I'm reading over a draft [on paper] of what I've written. (I like to leave it on the PC, but I need to print it out [sometimes] and look at it on paper. I notice more problems--see shape better--can make more and better corrections. It's as though when I only see it on the screen it's still in my mind--I can't get as fully outside it till I have it on a piece of paper before me and can make marks on it.)
>
> As I'm trying to think about [the] Vygotskian model, I'm saying things in my head, even jotting a phrase or sentence in the margin. Suddenly I realize I need to turn on my machine and start writing. [In fact, I didn't go over to the machine but started writing on a pad--and what I produced is these ten short paragraphs.]
>
> It's not till I start writing that I can see what I'm thinking and deal with it. Otherwise it's too much in me--I'm too tangled up in it--I get caught in little loops and don't make progress--can't untangle myself and go off on actual paths or streams.
>
> To write, then is to to reflect--to utter discourse not so much to me as for me.
>
> That's a gift of language I've had to learn through practice. Now I'm comfortable. I see many of my students who can not.

It's [this reflective mode I've learned] not just muttered words that you say to yourself as you're trying to do a task ("let's see, this goes here--damn where does that go? where am I?") (which I gather children do). There's no reflectivity in them [those muttered words]. Yet they're [my more reflective words] not utterance aimed at me as an audience either. Not trying to suit me. They're for me. In fact there's no necessity to read them over. One writes this and writes them as trial strings of discourse and often doesn't read them over--waiting till one feels as though it comes out right and one says, "Yes, that's got it, that's going in the right direction, that's saying what I'm trying to say (that matches my felt sense)." Usually it's not a matter of reading it over (as audience) to see if it's right--usually it's a matter of experiencing as one's writing that it's not quite right or it is right.

The realizing that this is a right one is not made as reader--but as writer--one feels the words as emerging on the right track.

Later, of course, in trying to revise, one does read as reader, as audience--looking at one's words "from the outside"--to make em better--but at this stage one feels or experiences one's words "from the inside" or "as emitter"--and feels if they match.

That's the kind of language use we need to teach students. It's not audience oriented. It's a use of language for self solitary reflection. It's harder for little kids and adolescents. It requires practice, learning, and development. And practice in audience-awareness is no help--(though we need practice in audience orientation for other reasons).

This is not a very outlandish piece of prose from a reader's point of view (especially compared to much of my private reflective writing), and it obviously grows out a social matrix (my impulse to "reply" to certain members of the composition community), and it was written as part of an overall effort to end up with something for an audience. Nevertheless, in writing it I was unambiguously stepping away from my engagement with my audience, putting aside the needs of readers (for I'd been trying to keep their needs in mind as I was revising), and exploring for myself what was then a new thought and seeing where it would come out. (In truth, when I started writing this passage I thought I was producing a piece of "process" or "meta" writing for my folder of jottings about my own writing process. Not till I written quite a few lines did I realize I had drifted into writing about the content of my essay.) Nor do I experience this as a "regression" to a "less mature" cognitive mode, but rather something learned, mature, and more or less under my control (though "egocentric" in a non-derogatory sense--and there is an important element of "letting go" involved).

Notice, then, that the Piagetian and Vygotskian developmental models (language-begins-as-private vs. language-begins-as-social) give us two different lenses through which to look at a typical weakness in student writing: the tendency to leave so much unexplained and undeveloped. Using the Piagetian model, as Flower does, one can specify the problem as a weakness in audience orientation. The writer ("immaturely") has taken too much for granted and assumed that these

limited explanations carry full meanings for readers as he feels they do for himself. The cure or treatment is for the writer think more about readers.

Through the Vygoskian lens, however, the problem and the "immaturity" look altogether different. Yes, the writing isn't particularly clear or satisfying for readers, but the psychological problem behind the text is a weakness in the ability to develop a train of thought through that reflective, desert island discourse with oneself that is so central to mastery of the writing process. The cure or treatment is more practice in exploratory writing to discover or generate one's own thoughts on the issue--which is likely to mean putting aside the needs of readers.

Two different diagnoses, two different treatments. Is the determining weakness a failure to connect with readers or a failure to connect with the self and the issue. No doubt the answer will be different with different texts and different students. We need both lenses to get at what's really going on in a text and in a writer. And of course one way to connect better with the self and an issue is to connect better with readers who care about it. But it is also true that one way to connect better with readers is to forget them and invest more in the self in the issue for its own sake or one's own sake--to set in motion unfolding threads of discourse and see where they lead.

Perhaps the audience awareness bandwagon is rolling so powerfully now because it is fueled by both psychological models. From one side, the Piagetians say, in effect, "The egocentric little critters, we've got to socialize 'em!" From the other side, the Vygotskians say, in effect, "No wonder they're having trouble writing. They've been bamboozled by the Piagetian heresy. They think that they're individuals--that they have private selves--especially when they write. All will be well, however, if we can just get them to think more about audience--get them to experience and accept the inherent connectedness that exists between themselves and their communities of discourse--and while we're at it, get them hooked up to a better class of discourse community." Thus in sticking up for the value of ignoring audience while we write, I feel I am caught in a crossfire between two opposing armies. And yet in the end what could be more obvious and venerable than to see writing as a private and solitary activity.

Now of course some of the champions of the Vygotskian model will say that what I call private or solitary mental work is not really private or solitary at all. They will stress that because language and thinking have a social origin and characteristically continue in a social context, that discourse is always and inherently social: even on the desert island, we are talking to voices and through voices which we have internalized through our social history. Ken Bruffee likes to quote Frost on this point: "We work together whether we work together or apart."

But though we need the Vygotsky model as an antidote to an oversimple or overliteral application of the contrary Piagetian model, I would warn against overstatement here. We will paper over an indispensible distinction if we try to use the word "together," literally, for both private and public activity. Perhaps all

discourse and thinking have a social dimension; perhaps every word or thought I produce in private is really directed in some sense "from" or "to" some other voice in my life. Even if that is wholly so, it is crucial both for theoretical and practical reasons to distinguish between those pieces of discourse and thinking that are suited to an actual audience, and those other pieces of discourse and thinking that are private and solitary--where we don't worry at all about whether others can follow.

As educators, particularly, we need language to talk about that crucial cognitive capacity we would like to impart to all our students but which we fail to impart to so many--the capacity to engage in extended and productive thinking and writing without anyone else in the room--especially about an issue that matters to the writer but doesn't happen to matter to others. And we need a way to talk about the fact that desert island mental discourse can do its job well yet not fit the needs of others. When it is good it's good because it suits the needs of self or language or thinking.*

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*Some readers who are particularly struck with the audience-oriented dimension in writing might perfer to think of the "private," "solitary" writing I am talking about (and that Joe was doing in his journal) as "writing oriented to the audience of self"--and thus not a case of "ignoring audience." This, however, seems to me a peculiar and unhelpful way to use the word "audience"--since the word is usually designed to specify people other than the self. If we talk about addressing discourse to "the audience of self," we are talking about a process where we don't have to "keep the audience in mind" or "decenter" or be less "egocentric"--nor engage in any of the other cognitive activities that audience awareness advocates stress. The main thing we experience in such writing is relief at not having to think about audience. Surely we should save the paradoxical phrase "audience of self" for those striking and unusual situations which are in fact paradoxical--situations where we really do experience ourselves somehow as two people--one of them standing back and being a spectator of the other from the outside.

The value of learning to ignore audience while writing, then, is the value of learning to cultivate the private dimension: writing as a way to make meaning to oneself, not just to others. This involves learning to free oneself (to some extent, anyway) from the enormous power exerted by society and others: to unhook oneself from external prompts and social stimuli. And of course writing--because it is solitary and permits a dialogue with the self--is a mode of discourse which is preeminently suited to helping us develop this private and solitary dimension of our mental lives. Here is a major glory of writing.

I see no good reason to discount (as people like Berkenkotter tend to do) the striking testimony of so many of those in our culture who think and care most about language: professional poets, writers, and philosophers. Many of them insist vehemently that their most serious work is not communication to audience at all. They insist they are making, not communicating, and that their commitment is to language, reality, logic, experience--not to readers. They go where those factors take them, and if readers cannot follow, they are

willing to leave readers behind and push on alone. These writers often tell us that it is only in their willingness to cut loose from the demands or needs of readers that they can discover what is most valuable.

Here is William Stafford on the matter:

> I don't want to overstate this...but...my impulse is to say I don't think of an audience at all. When I'm working, the satisfactions in the process of writing are my satisfactions in dealing with the language, in being surprised by phrasings that occur to me, in finding that this miraculous kind of convergent focus begins to happen. That's my satisfaction, and to think about an audience would be a distraction. I try to keep from thinking about an audience."

Even as Donald Murray is engaged in being convinced by Berkenkotter that audience may play a bigger role in his writing than he had thought, he sees even more clearly how much his writing process also depends on a need to fight audience awareness: "My sense of audience is so strong that I have to suppress my conscious awareness of audience to hear what the text demands." (Berkenkotter---My emphasis.)

Some writers describe some of their writing activity as much more like "solving a problem" or "getting something right" (for it's own sake) than addressing an audience or making contact with readers. Interestingly, this experience of writing links poets with philosophers and even mathematicians: it points to the "poetic" function of language in it's literal sense--"poesis" as "making." How can we the doing of mathematics or logic as a legitimate if limiting case that illustrates one pole in the range of ways that humans characteristically use discourse. If I am trying to solve an equation or get some piece of logic right, shall we say that I am addressing an audience? The answer is obvious: it depends. Sometimes I may indeed be trying to speak to readers, but sometimes clearly I am not--I am only trying to please or suit myself. The point I'm trying to stress in this essay is that we cannot answer such questions in a priori terms based on the nature of language or discourse but only in terms the different mental activities different people engage in with different purposes. Surely the non-audience oriented, "poetic" or "making" mode of discoursing that we see in poetry or logic is a "high" one, not a "low" one--one that we want to help students stretch themselves to learn to engage in.*

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*In a sense I'm just reiterating some of the claims of Socrates and Plato against the audience-oriented sophists--claims of "pure" dialectic against "impure" rhetoric. However, Plato might balk at someone taking (as I do) a kind of "impure" Ben Franklin-like utilitarian position that "honesty to self" is sometimes the best "policy with audience," Plato might take exception.

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In this third section, then, I am trying to warn against the danger of borrowing psychological models too glibly. If we do so, we are liable to overlook our own and our students' experience--in this case the common experience of finding it helpful sometimes to steer our words deliberately out of the orbit of audience. If we must have a psychological or developmental model for our talk about writing, it had better be complex, paradoxical, or spiral--or better yet, we should be deft enough to use two models or lenses. Jerome Bruner stresses development as complex movement in an upward spiral (which thus involves repetition), not simple movement in one direction.

Thus on the one hand, it is characteristic of the youngest children to direct their discourse to an audience; without an audience they remain mute (like "the wild child"); they learn discourse because they have an audience. Language is social from the start.

Nevertheless, it is also characteristic of the very youngest children to use language in a nonsocial way. Children use language not only because people talk to them but also because they have such a strong propensity to play and to build--often in a non-social fashion. That is, although one paradigm experience with language is communicative and social, another is solitary exploration and play. Babies and toddlers characteristically babble in an exploratory and reflective way--to themselves and not to an audience--often even with no one else near. (This archetypally private use of discourse is strikingly illustrated when we see a pair of toddlers playing "alongside" each other--each busily talking in parallel but not at all trying to communicate with the other.) We should think of a child building a sand-castle or drawing a picture as paradigm discourse activity just as much the child's use of words to communicate with another. Though children often eagerly show their castle or picture to an audience, often they don't. Often they trample the castle and crumple up the picture before anyone else has seen them--not like Brahms staggering downstairs as he's dying in order to rip up the dozen or more unpublished string quartets that he was unsatisfied with, but rather with a genuinely delighted sense of satisfaction in the very thing destroyed: the making and the unmaking are obviously equally important stages in the poesis.

Thus we mustn't make the mistake of thinking of language only as communication--nor think of communication as the most developed or "mature" form of discourse. Language is just as essentially the stringing together of exploratory discourse for the self, for its own sake, and for the creation of objects ("play," "poesis," "making"). Though language is "inherently" communicative (indeed, we may need the communicative activity as infants in order to learn to use our natural gift for language), nevertheless language is just as "inherently" the making of objects or the manipulation of symbols--and we don't always make objects or manipulate symbols for the sake of communication with others. Note that "writing to learn"--which "writing across the curriculum" programs are discovering to be so important--tends to be writing for the self or even for no one at all rather than for an outside reader: you throw away the writing, unread, and keep the neural/synaptic changes it has engendered. (Even when a maker/"poet" is producing objects very much for an audience, often she is not so much trying to communicate to that audience as to build a

meaning/message/structure that others can look at, enjoy, or participate in.)*

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*James Britton makes a powerful argument for how the "making" or "poetic" function of language grows out of the expressive function--which although it is sometimes communicative for an audience, often is not; and either way, expressive language is more for the sake of the speaker than for the (sometimes) audience. See his The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18 [NCTE 1977]; and "Writing to Learn and Learning to Write" and "Spectator Role and the Beginnings of Writing" in his Prospect and Retrospect: Selected Essays of James Britton, Gordon Pradl, ed. [Boynton/Cook 1982].)

As children get older the story must remain complex or spiral. That is, on the one hand, even though babies start out with a natural gift for using language in a social communicative fashion, oddly enough it is a developmental task as we mature, continually to have to learn to relate our discourse better to an audience--to decenter better. And yet on the other hand, even though babies start out with a natural gift for using language in a private, exploratory, and playful way, it is also a developmental task as we mature, continually to have to learn to master this solitary, desert-island, and poetic mode better. Thus neither social communicative language nor private reflective or "poetic" language must be allowed to claim dominance as the earliest nor most essential nor most developed form of discourse. Both modes are noble--primal and mature--and we must learn to foster both.

4

So what does all this mean for our everyday teaching? For of course the practical question cannot be held off any longer. I believe it means--whether or not we like paradoxes--that we are just plain stuck with two contrary tasks. On the one hand we need to help our students decenter, to be more aware of audience, and to suit their often private discourse better to the needs of readers. Yet on the other hand, I claim it is every bit as important to help our students also to learn to free themselves from the constraints of audience and to use discourse in the desert island mode.

The two models show us that we must help students learn not only to "try harder" but also to "just relax"--for the sake of both goals. That is, often we must teach them how to "try harder:" not only to fit their words to an audience, but also to write in solitude in the desert island mode--without dependence on social interchange. Yet most of us have also noticed that a crucial breakthrough comes for many students when they stop clenching and learn to "just relax" and have fun following words where they want to go: and that sometimes this non-clenching process leads to casual writing for the self that doesn't give a damn about audience; and sometimes it taps those aboriginal social habits which lead students naturally to emit discourse fitted to the community they are engaged with. But students often have to be taught how to unclench as they write.

When we enter the realm of practical teaching we see how intertwined public and private writing are--or should be. That is, if we emphasize the social dimension in our teaching (for example, by getting students to work in pairs and groups, to write to each other, to read and comment on each others' writing, and by staging public discussions and even debates on the topics students are to write about), we will obviously help public, social, communicative writing--help students experience writing not just as jumping through hoops for a grade but rather as taking part in the life of a community of discourse. But it is important to remember that this "social" discourse can also help private writing--help students get sufficiently involved or invested in an issue that they finally want to carry on producing discourse alone and in private--and for themselves.

Correlatively, if we emphasize the private dimension in our teaching (for example, by using lots of private freewriting and journal writing), we will obviously help students learn to write better reflectively for themselves without the need for others to interact with. Yet this private discourse can also help public, social writing--help students finally feel full enough of their <u>own</u> thoughts finally to have some genuine desire to <u>tell</u> them to others. Students often feel they "<u>don't have anything to say</u>" until they finally succeed in engaging themselves in private desert island writing for themselves alone.

Of course many students <u>experience</u> themselves as having nothing to say when asked to freewrite or to write in a journal--especially that great mass of students we meet in required writing courses who are not already fired up about writing or learning. They will dutifully "reply" to peers or to a text, but cannot seem to <u>initiate</u> a train of thought on their own. Because so many adolescent students perform in this way, many teachers chime in and agree: "Adolescents have nothing to write about--they are too young, they haven't had significant experience yet." This is nonsense of course--even for adolescents with sheltered lives. But such students need practice and help: reflective writing in the desert island mode is a learned cognitive process. Freewriting isn't just "easy"--just a relief from trying to right right. To use freewriting most productively represents a learned skill that may also depend somewhat on psychological development. Students need practice. As teachers we need persistence and we need to make use of special techniques for helping students develop the skill of writing reflectively (for example, Ira Progoff's "Intensive Journal" techniques, the Sondra Perl's "Composing Guidelines," or my "loop writing" and "open ended writing" processes in <u>Writing With Power</u>).

Interestingly enough, perhaps the best way we can help students learn to write in the desert island mode--help them learn to ignore the needs of audience, turn off the babble of <u>outside</u> voices in the head, and listen better to quiet <u>inner</u> voices--is to be a <u>special kind of audience</u> to them: a reader who is particularly supportive and nurturant because she trusts and believe in the writer. Private reflective writing requires a significant trust and confidence in oneself and a nurturing reader helps a writer learn to trust herself and gives her a kind of permission to be <u>her own</u> reader. I have benefitted from this special kind of audience and seen it prove useful

to others. (Again we see the principle from Vygotsky and Meade: even when the task is to learn to listen better and more trustingly to the self, we can go a long way toward learning it through interaction with another person.)

Here is some "process writing" by a student starting out on a long and ambitious writing project. He articulates his need for precisely this special kind of audience:

> I think I need more of a sense of audience to achieve this--but an absolutely unjudgmental, totally invested, absolutely caring audience (Portnoy's therapist?) interested in me as only I am or can be--so I am then my own audience but in a different way.

When I try to be this supportive or nurturant kind of reader, I am not pretending to give judicious assessment or objective feedback. I am saying, in effect, "Let me read what you have written. I am interested in learning what you have to say. I will not respond at all, I will just pay attention and let you, as it were, feel my presence as a silent listener. [Or I won't try to respond with feedback, I will simply tell you some of the thoughts I have on the topics you treat.] I won't put my efforts into trying to decide what I think is strong or weak--or perhaps I'll point out passages or aspects I like. For an evaluative reading, get me some other time--or get some other reader. Rather, I will put my efforts into entering into your frame of reference and fully hearing and understanding what you are saying--even if you are still in the process of working it out." (Some teachers will say that they cannot be interested in what they are not interested in, but of course we can choose to listen to anything with interest.)

5. Conclusion

Whether to keep audience in mind as we write depends on many factors (most of which I treat more fully in the four chapters on audience in Writing With Power). Here are the ones that seem most important:

--The nature of the audience. When we put this audience in mind or try to enter into its frame of reference, are we helped or hindered in our efforts to think well and produce good discourse?

--The temperament of the writer. Am I the kind of person who tends in general to benefit from keeping audience in mind? Does audience awareness tend to help me think of more to say and naturally to shape what we think of? Or am I (as in fact I am) the kind of person who tends to think and write better by blotting out audience awareness?

--The nature of the writing task. Is this piece of writing really for an audience? More often than we realize, it is not: it is a draft that only we will see (though the final draft will be for an audience); it is exploratory writing for the sake of figuring something out; or it is some kind of personal private writing meant only for ourselves. And even if what we're writing is "for" an audience, does it need to "communicate" with them or can it be, as it

were, an "object" or structure (a "making") for them to observe? Perhaps it doesn't have to "fit" them at all but will do its job on readers best if it stays resolutely in its frame of reference and sucks them into "decentering."

--If audience is getting in the way, is it a problem of double audience? We may not realize how often we are writing to two audiences, and how this situation might be interfering with our writing. Students, of course, are frequently told to write to a particular "real-life" audience--and/or perhaps to their peers in the class--but of course they are also writing for the teacher or the examiners. (Students encounter this situation more frequently as more teachers get interested in audience--and thus suggest other audiences for exams or writing assignments.) But it's not just students who have double audiences. When we write a memo or report, we must often suit it not only to the "target audience" but also to some colleagues or supervisor. When we quote from someone we know (and especially if it is unpublished and we ask them for permission) we sense they will read us with particular care: how we use their words or what we say about them. (In revising this essay, I suddenly got a new view of a passage that involved a quotation from someone else when I imagined them reading it: it made me see a problem I'd missed.) When we write something for publication, it must be right for readers--but it won't be published unless it is right for the editors, and it won't be read if it's not right for reviewers. Children's stories won't be bought unless they are right for parents.

--If audience is getting in the way, does it come from the fact that my audience is a teacher who is likely to read differently from most normal readers? Teachers often know more than I do about my topic rather than less and are reading not to learn from me but to find out whether I have learned what they already know. They often read in order to judge and find problems rather than to gain information or pleasure. And I know that they often read what I've written in stacks of 25 or 50 pieces on the same topic--not because they want to but because they have to. To feel a peculiar pressure in writing to such an audience--perhaps even a conflict or blockage--seems to me a nonpeculiar response to the genuine complexity of audience realities.

--If audience is getting in the way, does the problem come from the real audience or the "audience-in-our-head?" That is, does the inteference come from our sense of the actual readers we are addressing with this piece, or from some powerful former readers who have taken up residence in our head and surreptitiously slid between us and our actual readers--or even between us and our attempts to talk privately with ourselves? For example, students often realize that a present teacher is a friendly and inviting audience, yet when they pick up a pen they cannot help but fall under the spell of a former powerful teacher who was an intimidating audience. They do not fear their real audience, but they cannot keep from writing fearfully, defensively, or even not at all. Readers-in-the-head trick us into talking to them when we are really trying to talk to someone else--they distort new business into old business.*

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*Walter Ong ("The Reader is Always a Fiction,"---) emphasizes the

important point that all audience is "in the head:" we cannot have direct unmediated knowledge of others; we necessarily create our audience. But for writing, a cruder and more practical point also needs emphasis: There is much more danger from audience-in-the-head when we write than when we speak; when we speak we have real people there before our eyes, replying to us, keeping us turned in to them. Live audiences are, as it were, "less in the head."

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford ("Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy," CCC 35.2, May 1984, 155-171) stress the important difference between the two audiences of their title, but here too a cruder more practical point also needs emphasis: There is just as much danger of interference or even derailment by powerful past audiences than by misconceptions of our present audience. (Due to the psychological law that says we've usually done something wrong, audience-in-the-head is almost invariably critical and judgmental when the real audience is vague or consists of people we don't know.)

As with Donald Murray, I suspect it is my own hypersensitivity to audience that has made me unusually aware of the benefits of blotting them out--has taught me to shut my eyes when I talking about something hard. If nothing else makes us realize that we need sometimes to ignore audience as we write, an understanding of the complexity of the audience realities we face may do the trick: double audience and audience-in-the-head--not to mention the conflicts between tastes and points of view within "one" audience.

Still we needn't think of the complexity of audience issues as disabling when we come down to the realm of actual writing and the teaching of writing. The practical morals of this complex story are in fact fairly straightforward and simple:

(1) When writing a piece intended for an audience, we must always strive for audience awareness sometime. The only question is when during the writing process to do so. For at any given moment as we write, we have a choice about whether to think about audience or put them out of mind. A useful rule of thumb is to start by putting the real audience in mind. If that helps, carry on; if it gets in the way, put them out of mind (and write either to no audience, to self, or to an inviting audience). But always revise with audience in mind. (Here's another occasion when popular advice is wrong about writing but right if applied to revising.)

(2) We should seek occasions for engaging in writing not intended for an audience. This will not only encourage some good pieces of language and thinking we won't get otherwise, it will also increase our skill in the desert island mode and thus tend to encourage an important process of cognitive and psychological development.

(3) We should work on developing greater awareness of our own writing processes (meta-cognition) so we can get better at taking control and consciously deciding when to keep audience in mind and when to ignore them.